



## Latina Teachers and the “BA Challenge:”

Impacts and Conditions of  
Increasing Degree Requirements in  
Early Childhood Education



UnidosUS, previously known as National Council of La Raza (NCLR), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our community stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

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Latinos will soon represent nearly 30% of all students enrolled in United States schools. Our success as a nation is tied to their success, and UnidosUS's education work is dedicated to ensuring all children have access to quality education.

Our education programs, policy, and advocacy ensure that all kids have the opportunity to become empowered adults. We work with practitioners, policymakers, and advocates to develop and promote best practices that help students succeed from early childhood programs through college and beyond.

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# Latina Teachers and the “BA Challenge:”

## Impacts and Conditions of Increasing Degree Requirements in Early Childhood Education

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research clearly demonstrates that high quality preschool programs have significant and consequential impacts upon children's long-term outcomes. For example, the foundations of reading success are based in the skills and abilities developed before age five (Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998). Meanwhile, Latino children are a large and rapidly growing demographic in need of appropriate, high-quality early childhood education.

Increasingly, policymakers for federal and state preschool programs have raised credentialing requirements for early childhood education (ECE) teachers. Nationally, about one in five (19%) of all ECE teachers are Latina (NASEM, 2017). Latina teachers bring an incredible amount of experience to the classroom: 27% have between 10 and 15 years in the field, and an additional 24% have worked in ECE for more than 16 years (Griffin, 2018). However, most Latina ECE teachers do not possess a bachelor's degree.

It is crucial that the field retain, support, and develop Latina ECE teachers. Latino children are a large and growing group within the United States population. By 2050, some estimates are that one of every two public school children in the United States will be Latino (Tang, Dearing and Weiss 2012). It is imperative to retain and even increase the number of Latinas in the ECE workforce. Latina teachers bring an understanding of the culture and heritage of the children to their classrooms and to their teaching; identify with the lived experiences of the children and their families; and are often able to support the continued development of children's proficiency in Spanish (Espinosa 2010; Flores 2017; NASEM 2017; Nieto 2017).

### THE "BA CHALLENGE"

In 2018, UnidosUS conducted policy research on Latina teachers working in ECE settings operated by our Affiliate organizations. Our primary purpose was to examine the "BA Challenge," namely: the concern that Latina ECE teachers without degrees would lose or leave their positions due to increased educational requirements. Across the United States, many Latina ECE teachers must now have a bachelor's degree or be enrolled in a degree program as a condition of their employment.

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

We found minimal evidence that ECE teachers among UnidosUS Affiliates are leaving the field due to increased educational requirements.

Our research indicated that:

- The real "BA Challenge" is that teachers are seeking degrees but are not properly compensated.
- The continuing under-compensation of ECE teachers undermines program quality.
- Some teachers must finance the entire costs of their degree, which is especially burdensome given their compensation.

- Requirements for associate and bachelor’s degrees are often un-aligned, which delays degree completion, adds significantly to the costs of earning a degree, and produces additional stress for individuals working in a stressful job.
- Many degree programs do not address children who are dual language learners, which is a significant mismatch between the composition of the classrooms our teachers work in and their academic preparation.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

UnidosUS recommends the following for federal and state policy:

1. Increase ECE teacher compensation to be commensurate with job responsibilities.
2. Increase supports and system alignment to facilitate teacher’s degree completion, including a federal scholarship program.
3. Revise teacher preparation programs to meaningfully incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as substantive and fundamental to course syllabi and degree program requirements.
4. Revise teacher preparation programs to mandate transparent and seamless articulation agreements that facilitate the transition from associate degrees into bachelor’s programs without loss of credits.
5. Revise teacher preparation programs to assess and develop the availability of hybrid (blended) and on-site course offerings to meet available demand.
6. The field should recognize and incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as essential elements of high-quality ECE.

## **METHODOLOGY**

UnidosUS conducted interviews with 26 program administrators from 11 of our Affiliates. We also conducted 10 focus groups with 94 teachers employed in Early Head Start, Head Start, Migrant/Seasonal Head Start, or state pre-K programs. Thirty-two participants (34%) indicated having 15 or more years of experience in the field. Focus groups were conducted in the preferred language(s) of participants (English, Spanish) and videotaped, then transcribed and coded.



# PART 1: THE BA CHALLENGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

## INTRODUCTION

Using a combination of program administrator interviews and teacher focus group narratives, the UnidosUS Early Childhood Education (ECE) Workforce project investigated the **“BA Challenge”**—the concern that Latina\* teachers in the ECE workforce without degrees will lose their positions, as programs require (or, increasingly prioritize) hiring teachers with bachelor’s degrees. In many cases, ECE teachers, some with many years of experience, must have a BA degree in ECE or be enrolled in a degree program as a condition of their employment.

Our goal is to bring the voices of Latina program administrators and classroom teachers into the center of continuing discussions regarding quality and qualifications in early childhood education.

As the largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States, UnidosUS (formerly, the National Council of La Raza) is in a unique position to gather information from early childhood education programs serving Latino children and families and employing large numbers of Hispanic teachers. Founded in 1968, UnidosUS works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans through its network of nearly 300 affiliated community-based organizations (Affiliates).

This report is organized into two sections. In Part 1, UnidosUS reports findings from interviews with Affiliate program administrators and ten teacher focus groups. We identify and discuss responses to the BA Challenge and describe some of the many conditions and challenges that Latina teachers face when working and pursuing college degrees. We also explore options for alternative certification.

In Part 2, UnidosUS presents state and federal policy recommendations and identifies several areas for future investigation.

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\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.



## BACKGROUND

In ECE, many important trends converge. There is a continuously expanding body of research evidence demonstrating the power and importance of early learning and development, which provides the broader context for understanding the ECE workforce. In the last five years, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) have published multiple reports on child development, parenting, learning, dual language learners, and the ECE workforce. The increasing evidence base, in turn, coincides with increasing investments in programs serving young children. According to the Education Commission of the States, during 2017-2018, 28 states increased funding levels for their pre-K programs (Parker et al. 2019).

Increased funding intersects with other trends: first, closer scrutiny of program effects and outcomes; second, continuing efforts to improve program quality. A prominent policy tool aimed at improving program quality has been to raise the educational requirements of ECE teachers. In the most recent count, 35 states now require lead teachers in state-funded pre-K programs to have a bachelor's degree in ECE (Barnett et al. 2017), an increase of nine states over the last 10 years (Loewenburg 2018). In the federally-funded Head Start program, Congress mandated that 50% of teachers possess an associate degree in ECE in 1998, followed by the 2007 legislation mandating that 50% of teachers have a bachelor's degree in ECE by 2013 (NHSA 2019).

Not surprisingly, the impetus for high quality ECE programs and classrooms has never been stronger. McCoy et al. (2017) reported that children's participation in high quality ECE results in statistically significant reductions in special education placement and grade retention and increases in high school graduation rates. These are important, long-term benefits to children and society that justify increasing funding from a cost-benefit perspective. Unfortunately, ECE programs vary widely in quality (Valentino 2018), and ideas about quality lack consensus.

## 1 of 4 Public School Students are Latino



## Up from just 1 of 10 Students a Decade Ago.



According to Goffin and Barnett (2015), at the state level, the definition of quality as defined by QRIS (state quality rating systems) often remains incomplete and contested “because of disagreements about values and differences in interests” (181). One important disagreement is the extent to which programs can and should include children’s home languages and cultures into their systems and services. For UnidosUS, the research evidence demonstrates that the time has come for ECE programs to move beyond current differences and to adopt policies and practices that recognize and respect the cultures and home languages of all children and families.

Concurrently, demographic trends are an important consideration: Latino children are a large and rapidly growing group in need of appropriate, high-quality early childhood education. The demographic evidence is striking: currently, one of four public school students are Latino (up from just one in ten students a decade ago) (Bulotsky-Shearer, Lopez, and Mendez 2016). This may increase to as many as one of two students by 2050 (Tang, Dearing, and Weiss 2012). Unfortunately, a legacy of discrimination persists, undermining educational opportunities for Latino children from their earliest years.

### The BA Challenge

In 2018, UnidosUS conducted policy research on Latina teachers working in ECE settings operated by UnidosUS’ Affiliates. **Our purpose was to examine the “BA Challenge,” namely: how are Latina teachers within the ECE workforce without degrees responding to increasing educational requirements?**

According to the 2017 NASEM report *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, there have been mixed responses to this question within the field. For example, “some have argued that increasing the educational requirements for teachers may exclude currently employed teachers who share the ethnic and cultural diversity of the children they teach and who speak their languages,” whereas “others have found that with additional resources, these teachers can and do succeed in higher education” (NASEM 2017, 433). UnidosUS wanted to understand which—or both—of these responses were reflected at our Affiliates.

Nationally, about one in five (19%) of all ECE teachers are Latinas (NASEM 2017); however, less than half of ECE teachers nationwide have a BA degree (Whitebook et al. 2018). At the national level, Hispanic teachers are underrepresented in the role of teacher and overrepresented in aide/assistant teacher roles; however, stratification at the state and local levels is important, as this stratification may differ from national averages (Whitebook et al. 2018, 25).

What Latina teachers have is experience: 27% have between 10 and 15 years in the field and an additional 24% have worked in ECE for more than 16 years (Griffin 2018). Furthermore, Latina teachers bring an understanding of the culture and heritage of the children to their classrooms and to their teaching; identify with the lived experiences of the children and their families; and are often able to support the continued development of children’s proficiency in Spanish (Espinosa 2010; Flores 2017; NASEM 2017; Nieto 2017).

As mentioned previously, most state pre-K programs now require teachers to have a BA degree in ECE as a condition of their employment. State pre-K programs receive higher quality ratings when teachers have college degrees in ECE (i. e., levels 4-5 on a scale of 1-5), and thereby receive higher compensation than programs rated at lower levels (i.e., levels 1-3).

However, state pre-K rating systems may not reward programs for hiring staff who match the cultures and home languages of enrolled children and families. A review of state early learning standards and guidelines (Espinosa and Calderon 2015) found “a great range of attention to the learning profiles and needs of young DLLs [dual language learners]” (15). Although most states have recognized the need to set appropriate expectations for DLLs, few have integrated this perspective throughout all aspects of their ECE systems.

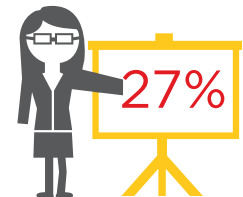
Even with increasing educational requirements, ECE teachers continue to earn poverty-level wages with 2018 median pay ranging from \$11.17 per hour (\$23,240 per year) to \$14.32 (\$29,780 per year) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Increased educational requirements could pose significant challenges for many Latina teachers, who may have many years of experience and high levels of expertise in working with children.

Nationally,  
About  
**1 in 5**  
(19%)

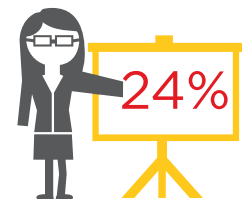


of all ECE teachers  
are Latinas  
(NASEM 2017)

Latina  
Teachers  
Have  
Experience:



Have between  
10 and 15 years in  
the field



Have worked in  
ECE for more than  
16 years  
(Griffin 2018)



If Latina teachers choose to exit the profession rather than enroll in a degree program, or if they are forced to resign from their positions, the BA Challenge could produce several negative impacts, including:

- The loss of cultural and linguistic diversity within the ECE field
- The loss of experienced personnel with the capacity to promote cultural responsiveness and support the continued development of Latino children's home language
- Minimizing or eliminating children's and families' access to teaching staff who are familiar with their culture, home language, and lived experiences in their communities
- Latina teachers losing employment and wages

In many cases, Latina ECE teachers with many years of experience are now required to have a BA degree in early childhood education or be enrolled in a degree program as a condition of their employment.





## METHOD

UnidosUS conducted ten focus groups with teachers from our national network of Affiliate organizations in order to understand the BA Challenge. In addition, we explored potentials for alternative certifications. For example, would some combination of formal education and online coursework (e.g., an associate degree in Early Childhood Education plus successful completion of online modules) constitute a viable alternative to the BA degree requirement?

The project used an iterative method of gathering narratives from teachers and program administrators at UnidosUS Affiliates to assess the impacts of the BA Challenge. First, we reviewed key publications on child development and the ECE workforce, including:

- *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015)
- *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (2017)
- *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (2018)

We used key findings and insights from these and other publications to create a set of questions for program administrators. Telephone or on-site interviews were conducted with 26 program administrators from 11 UnidosUS Affiliates (see p. 9 for the complete list of Affiliates who provided administrator interviews). Our notes from administrator interviews were reviewed and then used to formulate a list of questions for our focus groups.

Our approach to focus group questions was drawn from Bell (1988, in Riessman 1993, 34): to ask open-ended questions; to listen with a minimum of interruptions; and to tie subsequent questions to participants' prior comments. Focus group participants were invited to speak in the language(s) of their choice (Spanish or English). Some participants used one of these languages throughout the focus group session; many participants alternated between the two.

Focus groups were organized and conducted from among UnidosUS Affiliates operating early childhood education programs. Program types included: Early Head Start, Head Start, Migrant/Seasonal Head Start, and state pre-K (see p. 8 for the complete list of Affiliates where focus groups were conducted). Focus groups were conducted at Affiliate centers or offices and videotaped. Written transcripts of the videos were translated and prepared by professional transcriptionists. A bilingual project staff member reviewed the written transcripts against the videotapes to ensure accuracy of translation.

Transcripts were reviewed by three project staff and coded using open-coding techniques (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Maxwell 1996). To support the validity of our coding, analyses, and interpretations, a small group of program administrators and teachers who had participated in our interviews or focus groups were invited to a participant check meeting in February, 2019, to review and give feedback on the draft report.

It is important to note that the teacher focus group participants were selected by their programs after individual Affiliate programs were contacted by the UnidosUS ECE Workforce project. We were able to organize focus groups in urban and rural settings around the United States and across different program types. However, we did not obtain a nationally representative sample of participants for either the administrator interviews or the teacher focus groups. Therefore, our results cannot be considered to reflect the experiences, range of opinions, or the degree of consensus at the UnidosUS Affiliate organizations we spoke with, let alone for all UnidosUS Affiliates or the entire ECE workforce.

In addition to examining the BA Challenge and potentials for alternative certification, UnidosUS asked teacher focus group participants to describe aspects of their work and working conditions. We asked teachers about their experiences pursuing a college degree (in almost all cases, while employed full-time) and about the efficacy of their coursework in preparing them to support children's learning and development.

Finally, UnidosUS was able to obtain detailed descriptions of teachers' practices in the classroom (for example, establishing children's sense of belonging in the classroom, conducting positive interactions, or supporting a child's home language). This information will be presented through a series of *Practice Briefs* that will be posted on the UnidosUS website.

## 32 Participants (34%)



Indicated  
having fifteen or  
more years of  
experience in  
the field.

### Teacher Focus Groups

A total of 94 ECE teachers participated in ten focus groups, including 91 females and three males. The teachers were employed in Early Head Start, Head Start, Migrant/Seasonal Head Start, or state pre-K programs. Eighteen participants (19%) reported having five or fewer years of experience in any type of ECE position, while 32 participants (34%) indicated having fifteen or more years of experience in the field.

Focus group participants included teachers who had completed a BA degree and those at various stages of an associate or bachelor's degree program. A handful of participants had completed their BA degree and were enrolled (or expressed the intention to immediately enroll) in graduate programs to further their education and careers in the field.

UnidosUS Affiliates organized teacher focus groups for the ECE Workforce project in the following locations:

- Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Philadelphia, PA
- Conexión Americas, Nashville, TN
- East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, Raleigh, NC
- East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, Avon Park, FL
- El Concilio, Council for the Spanish Speaking, Stockton, CA (2 focus groups)
- Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO
- Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA
- Para Los Niños, Los Angeles, CA
- United Migrant Opportunity Services, Redgranite, WI



## Administrator Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 26 program administrators from 11 UnidosUS Affiliate organizations, either in person or via telephone. Program types included:

- Early Head Start
- Head Start
- Migrant/Seasonal Head Start
- State pre-K programs
- ECE Workforce Development Programs

The following UnidosUS Affiliates organized administrator interviews for the ECE Workforce project:

- Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Philadelphia, PA
- Centro Nia, Washington, DC
- Conexión Americas, Nashville, TN
- East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, Raleigh, NC
- El Concilio, Council for the Spanish Speaking, Stockton, CA
- Gads Hill Center, Chicago, IL
- Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO
- Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA
- Lawrence Community Works, Lawrence, MA
- Para Los Niños, Los Angeles, CA
- United Migrant Opportunity Services, Milwaukee, WI



## THE BA CHALLENGE: CONTEXT, FINDINGS, AND DISCUSSION

In order to understand the BA Challenge and its implications for Latina teachers, it is useful to consider an overview of the research on child development, the educational imperative for Latino children in the United States, and an outline of the ECE workforce.

### Early Childhood Education: What Does the Evidence Show?

There is a large and continuously growing body of scientific evidence that documents the importance of early learning and development.

The evidence demonstrates that children begin learning before birth (NASEM 2017). Early learning is powerful and rapid, shaped by innate capabilities for learning and language and driven by daily interactions between children and adults (Dickinson 2019). Early learning is founded upon and influenced by the family, community, social, cultural, and linguistic settings in which children grow up (NASEM 2018). Finally, early learning is **consequential**. There are clear and long-term connections between the development of very early skills and later achievement. For example, Bleses et al. (2016) reported a positive correlation between children’s productive vocabulary between 16-30 months of age and their academic achievement in sixth grade—a time span of ten years!

The burgeoning scientific evidence base has had a ripple effect upon the field. In recent years, there have been major revisions to existing frameworks, standards, and regulations. Consequently, the demands and expectations placed upon ECE programs and teachers have grown tremendously.

*“Hiring, retaining, and supporting the Head Start workforce remains the number one issue facing Head Start and the broader early care and education community in the next two years.”*

–National Head Start Association 116<sup>th</sup> Congress Policy Agenda (2019-2020)





## Latino Children: An Educational Imperative

It is critical that investments in early childhood education consider both the importance of early learning and the history and current impacts of discrimination and unequal opportunity.

Latino children are a large and rapidly growing segment of the United States population. In addition to the continuing achievement gap, there is a long-standing history of racial and ethnic discrimination in the United States school system. As Valant and Newark observe:

*“Latino Americans [also] have a long history of placement in segregated schools or classrooms. Today, most Black and Hispanic students attend school where the majority of the students are Black and Hispanic. These schools generally have fewer resources than schools where the majority of students are White...”* (2016, 332).



On the one hand, early learning and development is rapid, powerful, and meaningful to long-term development, achievement, and life success. Therefore, it is natural to think of the early childhood period as not simply worthy of investments, but essential. On the other hand, opportunities for the optimal support of early learning are not equitably distributed in the United States.

## The ECE Workforce

As the research evidence on the importance of early learning grows, there has been increased attention directed toward the people working in ECE settings. The Early Childhood Workforce Index (Whitebook et al. 2016) indicates that many key aspects of the ECE workforce have been static for decades, including:

- The workforce is almost entirely female
- Wages are amongst the lowest of any occupation
- The workforce is distributed among ECE programs that are a fragmented patchwork of different:
  - Funding sources
  - Regulations and policies
  - Organizational structures, cultures, and goals
  - Access to professional development opportunities and resources

*“I knew I wasn’t going to be a rich woman with the career I picked. But I didn’t think I was going to be this poor either.”*

–Teacher, Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Philadelphia, PA



Additionally, according to the 2015 analysis of demographic data by the Migration Policy Institute, the ECE workforce is moderately diverse. Immigrants make up 18% of the overall workforce, and Spanish is spoken by 16%. The total workforce is 61% white, 16% black, 19% Latino, 4% Asian, and 1% American Indian (Park et al. 2015).

### **The BA Challenge: Teachers’ Voices**

When programs informed teachers that they had to obtain a BA degree to keep their jobs, teacher focus group participants told UnidosUS that:

1. Small numbers of teachers left their positions.
2. A few teachers took demotions (i.e., lead teachers became teacher assistants/aides) rather than pursue a degree.
3. Most teachers enrolled in degree programs.

Our focus groups included small numbers of teachers who had completed a BA degree; the vast majority were enrolled in a degree program. Several focus group participants accepted demotions rather than seek degrees. These participants indicated that they were willing to accept a demotion because they like working with young children but did not wish to invest the time and expense of enrolling in a degree program.

It is important to note here that the focus groups did not include participants who left their positions because of the increasing educational requirements. Therefore, UnidosUS was unable to take their perspectives into account at this time. UnidosUS did ask focus group participants why they choose to remain in their positions. The responses to this question are presented on p. 23.

### The BA Challenge: Responses from Program Administrators

When UnidosUS interviewed ECE program administrators about the increased BA requirements, we heard the following:

1. A few administrators expressed intense dislike of the requirement (for example, “You don’t need a piece of paper to know how to work with children!”). This viewpoint was vehemently expressed but rare.
2. Several administrators said, “We love it!” These administrators went on to state that hiring teachers with degrees gave them a “foundation” to work from. That is, the degree plus several years of classroom experience and professional development opportunities organized by the program combined to produce an effective teacher of young children. This perspective was also infrequent.
3. Overwhelmingly, program administrators recognized and discussed the BA Challenge as a new but established reality of the field, frequently acknowledging the research basis for the requirement. Some administrators referred to research on brain development; others mentioned the importance of employing teachers who implement curriculum and research-based strategies with high levels of fidelity. All administrators spoke to the importance of development between birth through age five and the connection to later success in school and/or life.

The CEO of one UnidosUS Affiliate expressed her viewpoint on the BA degree requirement as follows:

“The standard [requiring teachers to have a BA degree] is **justified**. It’s not easy, but it’s justified. It’s better for the field to have teachers with a degree. The problem is that we need many, many more policies to be in place. We need policies to bring more people into the field. We need more policies to help people earn their degrees.”



### **“The BA Challenge:” For Many, An Accepted Reality**

Based on the responses UnidosUS obtained from the teacher focus groups and program administrator interviews, we present the following findings:

- Most of the program administrators and teachers that UnidosUS spoke with appear to have reconciled themselves to the BA Challenge.
- Program administrators continue to adapt to the requirement, considering ways to support staff to enter and to complete BA degree programs.
- Most of the teachers UnidosUS spoke with described multiple challenges connected with working and pursuing a degree, while at the same time employing various coping strategies on the way to obtaining degrees.

During the focus groups, UnidosUS learned that a few teachers began and completed their degrees in a few years. This was accomplished by taking up to four courses each semester—including the summer—while working full time!

Most teachers followed a slower pathway toward their degree(s). Participants spoke of having to interrupt their coursework for major life events (e.g., the birth of a child or caring for parents who were ill). Participants also mentioned that their degree attainment was slower than it might have been because they had to wait to take one or more required courses until they were offered by their college or university.

Regardless of the length of time in degree programs, many teachers expressed satisfaction with their progress to date and described examples of using knowledge learned from college coursework to improve their abilities to understand and support children’s development.



### Quality and Qualifications

Many program administrators we interviewed expressed the perspective that hiring a teacher with a BA degree in early childhood education was an initial step in developing a quality workforce. That is, teachers with a degree but little or no experience needed “several years” to become proficient in meeting the demands and challenges of managing a classroom and teaching young children.

None of the administrators or focus group participants UnidosUS spoke with supported the idea that a teacher with a BA degree is automatically able to implement a high-quality classroom. Program administrators spoke of the combination of a degree and experience (including extensive professional development) as keys to developing quality teachers. All programs included in the UnidosUS ECE Workforce project reported conducting extensive professional development offerings to support their teachers. With rare exceptions, UnidosUS discovered that this learning and professional development is rarely taken into account by institutions of higher education.

Teachers also indicated that the combination of professional development trainings offered by their program, their reflections on their classroom experiences, and their college courses gave them a solid basis for working with young children. Teachers expressed satisfaction and pride at having completed different levels of college coursework and spoke of incorporating their learning with their on-the-job experiences and reflections. In addition, teachers identified several significant shortcomings of their degree programs.



*“There’s just so many things that happen throughout the day that the book [college courses] cannot prepare you for.”*

–Teacher, Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO



## LATINAS IN THE ECE WORKFORCE: CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES

The daily reality for Latina ECE teachers enrolled in degree programs is a race between work, school, and personal/family life obligations, in which the latter often finishes in last place.

Teachers and program administrators reported numerous challenges that teachers face when balancing full-time work, familial responsibilities, and higher education, including:

- Community college acceptance of high school diplomas earned abroad
- Location and timing of classes offered
- Access to child care
- Existing, insurmountable student debt
- Low pay rates and low pay raises associated with degree attainment
- High cost of tuition
- Access to reliable transportation
- Summer classes not covered by financial aid

### Three Key Challenges to Degree Completion

UnidosUS examines three of these challenges in detail. These challenges were mentioned most frequently by focus group participants who are working full-time and pursuing a degree:

1. Variable payment/scholarship opportunities.
2. Unaligned degree pathways and transitions.
3. Negative impacts upon personal lives and relationships.

Each of the three issues lend themselves to policy solutions. In Part 2, UnidosUS presents policy recommendations to address each of the three challenges.

## Issue 1: Variable Tuition Payment/Scholarship Supports

In some of the focus group locations, including North Carolina, Florida, and Pennsylvania, participants receive T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, which provide up to 90% of their college tuition as well as additional support for textbook and transportation costs. According to the 2016 Early Childhood Workforce Index, T.E.A.C.H. scholarship programs operate in 24 states and the District of Columbia (Whitebook et al. 2016, 33). UnidosUS focus group participants who received T.E.A.C.H. scholarships were uniformly appreciative of and positive about their scholarship and program experiences.

### **T.E.A.C.H.**

(Teacher Education And Compensation Helps) provides scholarships to child care teachers, directors, and family child care home providers to complete college course work in early childhood education. These scholarships enable early educators to take coursework leading to credentials and degrees by making it possible for them to afford both the time and expense of going to school. T.E.A.C.H. was established in 1990 as evidence was mounting that teachers were leaving the field in droves, looking for better paying jobs.

Source: <https://teachecnationalcenter.org/t-e-a-c-h-early-childhood/>

In other locations, focus group participants without access to T.E.A.C.H. scholarships or other state financing programs receive substantial tuition and other support from their employers. For example, the Inspire Development Centers of Sunnyside, Washington, provides full tuition coverage for employees pursuing a BA degree and up to \$5,000 annually for staff working to obtain an AA degree. The program also purchases course textbooks and operates a lending library.

Program administrators emphasized the importance of setting credentialing expectations from the very beginning. For example, at the Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha program in Philadelphia, program administrators begin talking about teacher qualifications, credentialing, and degree programs from their first encounter with job applicants.

Finally, in some of our focus group locations, teachers bear most or all of the costs of their college tuition and related expenses. For these teachers, the task of earning a degree is especially burdensome, both personally and financially. Teachers are faced with the choice of enrolling in a degree program which they pay for themselves—or of leaving their positions.

In some programs, scholarship supports are lacking, but so too are pay ranges and salary steps linked to degree attainment. The following are samples of hourly salary ranges shared by UnidosUS Affiliate program administrators:

- Teacher with a CDA: \$12.00-\$18.54
- Teacher with an AA: \$14.00-\$21.14
- Teacher with a BA/MA: \$16.07-\$24.10

Based on responses from administrators in several programs: completing an AA degree can result in a \$.50/hour raise, while completing a BA degree can result in a \$1.00-\$2.00 per hour raise. From a financial perspective, an ECE teacher's pursuit of a BA degree is largely irrational in that the probable future wage increases do not come near to justifying the time and expense involved to obtain a degree.

## Issue 2: Unaligned Degree Pathways

### *Credentials and College Credits*

Slightly more than half of our focus group participants earned a Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential prior to beginning their college coursework. The Credential is based on a core set of six competency standards, which guide early care professionals as they work toward becoming qualified teachers of young children. The CDA is the most widely accepted credential in early childhood education and a traditional stepping stone on the path of career advancement. Some program administrators described the Credential as a valuable “first step” in developing capable (and eventually, credentialed) teachers.

Participants' experiences in receiving college credit for their CDA varied widely. Some participants received no college credit for their CDA. Others received a modest number of credits (i.e., 3-5) while some participants reported receiving as many as 12-15 credits toward a college degree. Obtaining the CDA is a substantial and time-consuming process, but it may not result in credit toward a college degree. This lack of alignment is a significant challenge to Latina and other teachers in the ECE workforce seeking to begin and complete degree programs.

### ***Moving from an AA to a BA Degree: Frequent Challenges***

UnidosUS also frequently heard of challenges that teachers faced after they earned an AA degree in Early Childhood Education and then entered a BA program. Many of our focus group participants who earned an AA degree could not apply all of the earned credits toward college coursework for a BA.

In some cases, teachers lost a significant number of credits due to an unsystematic transition between AA and BA degree programs and requirements. This was discouraging both personally and financially.

Finally, although programs often organize and implement significant professional development opportunities for teachers, we heard few examples of teachers receiving credit for these experiences.

### **Issue 3: Negative Impacts on Teachers' Personal Lives**

All focus group participants—in both urban and rural locations—spoke of “rushing” or “hurrying” to get to their college classes. Many talked about missing meals or grabbing “something to eat” between work and classes. Participants with children often spoke about having to rely upon others—friends, family members and sometimes other options—to care for their children while they were attending classes. Participants also described missing key events in their children’s lives or their children crying when they left the house or coming home for the night when their children were already asleep.

Based on our interviews and focus groups, the BA Challenge, although accepted by administrators and teachers, includes significant negative impacts upon teachers and their families. In fact, the teacher’s voices identified a striking irony:

- The rationale for requiring ECE teachers to earn a BA degree is the overwhelming body of research evidence that conclusively demonstrates that teachers’ daily interactions with children play a consequential role in children’s long-term achievement.
- However, teachers confronting the BA Challenge (i.e., working full-time and taking college courses) experience significantly reduced opportunities to interact with their own children.

This personal cost of deciding to remain in the field while pursuing a degree was mentioned at each of our focus groups. Here, UnidosUS presents a sample of the teacher’s voices we obtained:

*“I have three daughters. And they were small that time.... I went out of college by 10:00 pm. I get home by 11:00 pm, they were asleep. So, from Monday to Friday, I didn’t see my kids. Yeah, and I missed a lot of things from their school, like special activities, all that stuff. I missed one graduation and I always regret that. And there were a lot—lots of stuff lost.”*

–Teacher, Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO



*“...it was very challenging because I had my two-year-old son [when taking classes] ... So, my grandma would take care of him. So, it was, like, from 7:00 in the morning ‘till 4:00 pm, I was at work. I would drive back 15 minutes to my house, and just grab something and run out the door before my son would see me because he would start crying.”*

–Teacher, United Migrant Opportunity Services, Redgranite, WI



*“I had to take a bio[logy] class.... it’s a requisite of the college. So I’m like, why would I need bio class for my classroom? ... I was so rushed, so hurried, I began having depression and anxiety. The chaos of work, school, it’s really hard. And that class, even though it wasn’t something I was going to take to the [Head Start] classroom, but it’s something I need for my life. You need to have those—even five minutes of just sitting down in silence so you can collect yourself, breathe, or just calm down, because it’s difficult. Being a teacher is difficult.”*

–Teacher, Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Philadelphia, PA



*“I have had to wake up at two in the morning and look up information online, take a picture with my phone, translate word by word, look up in the dictionary whatever I don’t understand, write down the words in a notebook and add it to my vocabulary. And that is how I have been able to ‘climb the ladder’ and finish the courses... and the truth is that it has not been easy. But when you want something, you have to pay a price.”*

–Teacher, East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, Avon Park, FL





## Teacher Stress: A Fundamental Reality of ECE

In addition to the stresses involved in confronting the BA Challenge, teachers' daily working conditions involve substantial responsibilities as well as significant, and at times toxic, levels of stress and personal discomfort. Teachers' pursuit of college degrees while working full-time adds significantly to their stress levels. These conditions argue overwhelmingly for policy changes in teacher compensation and job supports.

At every focus group, participants spoke of stress as a fundamental, daily, and inescapable condition of their work. As the teacher's voices above so movingly express, teachers face significant stress and personal costs as they pursue a degree. Teachers also gave voice to the numerous sources of stress encountered during their daily work, including:

- Continuous responsibility for children's health and safety
- Substantial amounts of daily paperwork and documentation
- Managing relationships with diverse families
- Managing relationships with diverse coworkers
- Addressing children's diverse developmental levels, abilities, and interests
- Responding to challenging behaviors from children
- Low wages

Teachers are responsible for the health and safety of every child in their classroom at all times. Teachers emphasized that their responsibilities for documenting children's health and safety have increased dramatically in recent years. For example, in the past teachers may have taken attendance once a day. Now, teachers are required to take and record children's attendance far more frequently, in some cases every hour.

Teachers also discussed the enormous amount of paperwork within their daily work. In addition to documenting children's attendance, teachers fill out forms to document accidents, home visits, developmental assessments, and curriculum plans. At some programs, teachers are asked to check and to document the temperature of the refrigerators in order to ensure food safety! In every focus group, teachers estimated that they spend up to one hour per day doing paperwork, and perhaps more during certain times of the year.

Teachers at all focus group locations described instances of child aggression, both directed against other children and directed at themselves. Teachers described being hit, kicked, scratched, spit on, and bitten. One teacher at the Para Los Niños program in Los Angeles described how several children used wooden unit blocks as weapons. Some teachers reported that they encountered aggressive behaviors directed at them occasionally; other teachers reported encounters with aggression as "regular" or even daily occurrences.



Teachers' experiences with child aggression included various responses from programs and parents. In some cases, teachers reported that parents were willing and eager partners, working collaboratively to address their child's behavior. In other cases, parents were reported to have refused to cooperate, for example, refusing to authorize mental health evaluations. In addition, teachers' experiences with their programs varied as well: some teachers stated that they received strong support from their programs to address instances of child aggression; other teachers were unsatisfied with their programs.

In sum, the ECE teachers that UnidosUS spoke with occupy positions in which child aggression is a fundamental reality. However, it was interesting to note that, even when teachers described instances of child aggression that occurred daily, over a period of months, no focus group participant spoke of suspending or expelling children from their program. Instead, the teachers described their responses to child aggression in two ways.

First, teachers spoke of understanding a child's behaviors by taking the child's perspective. For example, a teacher in Philadelphia shared an emotional story of a child from Puerto Rico whose family had relocated to the city to escape the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria. The teacher noted that the child was frequently aggressive but described responding to the aggressive behaviors from the perspective of understanding the child's prior experiences and communicating acceptance when the child engaged in positive interactions.

Second, teachers in several focus group locations described their process of reflective thinking as they responded to children's aggressive behaviors. Teachers emphasized the importance of responding to children in ways that communicated acceptance and a willingness to engage. Teachers spoke about responding to acts of aggression in ways that kept the "lines of communication" open between themselves and the child. Further, teachers described reflecting upon their interactions with children during aggressive behaviors, to consider strategies and options for future, positive interactions with the child.

UnidosUS heard about numerous examples of child aggression during our teacher focus groups. We also encountered descriptions of thoughtful, caring, and sophisticated thinking that underlies the teacher's responses to aggressive behavior. Based on the responses UnidosUS received from our teacher focus groups, employment as a teacher in an ECE classroom demands a high degree of responsibility, includes constant paperwork and documentation, and involves high and sometimes extreme levels of stress.

### **Why Do You Stay?**

Focus group participants at all locations described the stressful nature of their jobs and the additional stress that pursuing a college degree involves. Therefore, UnidosUS asked participants, "why do you remain in your position?" Notably, none of the focus group participants that UnidosUS spoke with credited their college experiences or coursework with having an influence upon their decision to remain in the field. While degrees in ECE provide teachers with formal knowledge about childhood development and strategies for supporting children's development, we did not hear that college course work has an impact upon teachers' decisions to remain in the field.

Instead, in every location, the responses were generally similar, with two main reasons identified.

First, participants credited actions and efforts by program administrators. Many participants credited their programs for supporting them in their work and in their professional development, including college courses and other trainings organized by the program. Many teachers described their programs as being encouraging and supporting them to "grow" into their careers--e.g., transitioning from bus aide to assistant teacher to lead teacher over time.

Second, and more frequently, participants described their positive interactions with children and families as being an important reason for remaining in their positions. Participants at every location spoke of the personal satisfaction they obtained from their interactions with children, both immediate and longer-term.

Here, UnidosUS presents a sample of the teacher’s voices we collected, describing the reasons that they found their work important and fulfilling, reaffirming the idea that positive teacher-child interactions are an indispensable practice in ECE:

*“As I previously mentioned, I think that we are the ones that plant the seeds. If we water it with love, it will grow up to be beautiful; likewise, if we don’t water it, we don’t water at all, it will wither. So, we are the first teachers that will have this impact in those children’s education. So, those smiles, as I said, those hugs, are very important because we are building that trust in education, in adults, and in children with us, and with parents alike.”*

–Teacher, Inspire Development Centers, Sunnyside, WA



*“Every morning, they run to you, and they say, ‘I missed you,’ or ‘I did this,’ and they want to tell you about what happened when they weren’t with you. It makes you feel good that you made some kind of impact on these kids.”*

–Teacher, Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Philadelphia, PA



*“So, pre-K is, we’re the ones who get them ready, and every pre-K teacher knows it. So, you start off with that understanding. If we don’t get them to understand how to come in a classroom and how to focus and hopefully teach them how to love to learn, because if you don’t love learning what you’re learning, you’re not going to make it past second or third grade. That’s in pre-K.”*

–Teacher, Conexión Americas, Nashville, TN



*“Like, where I feel like the importance on how you raise kids nowadays is high, like we see the type of human beings we are around right now and all the conflicts and all the things happening all over the world. Then my job is I want to be that person that’s going to make little human beings be good human beings.”*

–Teacher, Guadalupe Centers, Kansas City, MO



*“I want to make a contribution. From my personal opinion, I believe that what I put into play and what we do together with my colleagues in the classroom comes from love and from passion.... When we arrive at the classroom, we leave everything else that is going on in our lives outside of that classroom. And we become like children, we play the role of children while we are in the classroom. We not only educate them, we transform their lives. That is what we do as teachers.”*

–Teacher, East Coast Migrant Head Start Project, Avon Park, FL



## LATINA ECE TEACHERS DISCUSS THEIR DEGREE EXPERIENCES

Focus group participants pursued degrees through various course formats, including:

- Traditional, face-to-face classes, which was by far the most common format
- Online classes
- Hybrid/blended formats (a combination of traditional, face-to-face classroom instruction and online experiences)
- Online degree programs, which was the least typical

Many teachers experienced several of these course formats as they pursued their degree program. A few participants expressed a preference for online courses. However, far more participants expressed reservations toward or negative experiences with this format. Typical comments of participants who expressed reservations included “that’s not how I learn” or “I need to be in a classroom with people.”

Participants who had taken hybrid courses were overwhelmingly positive about this format. Participants stated that they liked the opportunity to meet their instructors and classmates in person before beginning online assignments and communications. Participants felt that they could connect to the instructors; their peers; and the course material, while benefitting from reduced travel time and having more flexibility to complete assignments to best match their schedules and life responsibilities.

During our focus groups, UnidosUS heard about additional positive and negative aspects of participants’ college experiences.

### College Courses: What Works

When asked to identify the college courses that were most effective in supporting them to be successful in their daily work, participants most often mentioned the following:

- Classroom management
- Curriculum planning
- Child development/child psychology
- Behavior management
- Special education/working with children with disabilities

Many participants emphasized the importance of learning experiences that involved group work and assignments that were connected to “real life” situations, and those that included specific strategies for working with diverse children. Participants appreciated courses that helped them to understand children’s development in detail, to make plans to support children’s learning, and to connect daily experiences and interactions to children’s long-term developmental outcomes. Participants were especially positive about courses that developed their ability to be intentional, by identifying options for meeting diverse developmental needs of individual children.

However, focus group participants were unsatisfied with other aspects of their college coursework. A large majority of participants were highly critical that there was inadequate attention to cultural responsiveness and children who are dual language learners (DLLs) in their degree programs.

### College Courses: Inadequate Attention to Cultural Responsiveness and DLLs

All focus group participants had large numbers of DLLs in their classrooms, including Spanish-speakers and children from many other cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Unfortunately, most participants indicated that their degree programs did not include information about how to understand or how to work with children from diverse cultural backgrounds and DLLs (dual language learners). Participants in North Carolina and some participants in California stated that their college courses did include significant information on DLLs. However, participants at all other locations indicated that they received little or no information on cultural responsiveness or dual language development as part of their AA or BA programs.

The focus group participants UnidosUS that spoke with were critical of this disconnect. Participants who had completed a BA degree expressed frustration and disappointment that the time and effort they had invested in earning a degree did not include an understanding or knowledge of culturally and linguistically responsive practices. In addition, participants expressed regret that their degree did not prepare them to answer parents’ questions regarding their child’s dual language development.



Our findings are consistent with those of Ray and colleagues (2006, cited in NASEM 2017, 446). In their analysis of 226 colleges and universities offering bachelor's degrees in early childhood education (pre-K to grade 3), the authors found that although programs indicated an interest in the needs of children with diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, including DLLs and English learners (ELs), very few hours of such coursework were offered. Ray and colleagues reported that fewer than 15% of such programs—ranging from those leading to certificates, such as a child development associate, to those at the master's degree level—required coursework on teaching DLLs/ELs.

This issue is significant for the field, especially since the NASEM has issued multiple reports on the importance of a child's culture and home language to their learning and achievement (NASEM 2018; NASEM 2017). If degree programs do not address cultural and linguistic responsiveness in substantive ways, the ability of ECE teachers to serve Latino and other DLL children is drastically undermined. The situation is all the more crucial given the continuing achievement gap and the history of discrimination in the United States.

UnidosUS strongly believes that the cultures and home languages of all children and families are essential elements of high quality ECE and that substantial content information on cultural and linguistic responsiveness must be added into teacher preparation programs across all states.

### **Culture is an Essential Element of High-Quality ECE**

In 2018, the NASEM released *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. The report presents three compelling reasons why cultural responsiveness should be considered an essential element of ECE program quality and of college degree coursework:

1. "Culture coordinates the biological systems involved in learning and is the broader social context in which people engage in the experiences that enable them to adapt to the world and learn" (47).
2. "A number of studies indicate that a positive identification with one's racial or ethnic identity supports a sense of school belonging, as well as greater interest, engagement, and success in academic pursuits" (145).
3. "Culture shapes every learning environment and the experience of each learner within that environment: learners who find the classroom environment unfamiliar, confusing, unwelcoming, or unsupportive will be at a disadvantage" (157).

Culturally responsive practices are essential to all ECE programs for several reasons, including supporting children’s sense of belonging in their classroom, promoting their optimal learning, and serving as the foundation for effective family engagement. There are several important ways for the field to adopt a greater inclusion of culturally responsive practices:

- Incorporate cultural responsiveness in definitions of high quality programs and classrooms
- Provide instruction on cultural responsiveness in ECE teacher preparation programs
- Encourage administrators to embed cultural responsiveness into program planning and priorities

Research demonstrates how critical this is to children’s development, and demographic changes in the United States underscore its importance. UnidosUS strongly recommends that the field prioritize culturally responsive practices, because degree programs are not currently giving teachers all the information that they need to be successful in working with DLLs/ELs.

### **Understanding the Importance of a Child’s Home Language is an Essential Element of High-Quality ECE**

In 2017, NASEM released *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. The report summarizes the extensive research evidence demonstrating that a child’s home language should be valued and recognized as an essential element of ECE program quality and of college degree coursework.

Within the vigorous and long-running discussion about high-quality early childhood education, the value and importance of children’s home language(s) is frequently absent. More than four million children enrolled in preschool programs in the United States are DLLs (Goldenberg 2013). They constitute a large and rapidly growing segment of the United States population.

For young DLLs, their home language is their foundation for learning about the world and the context of their identity formation, relationships, and social-emotional development. It also has a key influence upon children’s communication and learning (NASEM 2017).

Scientific evidence contradicts the idea that home languages “get in the way” of learning English and of school success. Instead, the reverse is demonstrated: *Promising Futures* (NASEM 2017) points to the importance of children’s home language proficiency for their acquisition of English and their school success. The report goes on to state:

- “All ECE teachers of DLLs can learn and implement strategies that systematically introduce English during the infant, toddler, and preschool years while simultaneously promoting maintenance of the home language—an important principle” (6).
- “Preschool DLLs need systematic exposure to English to prepare them for success in kindergarten and beyond. However, important benefits are lost if the acquisition of English comes at the expense of continuing development in the child’s L1” (175).

Regrettably, although the research evidence on dual language development is extensive and has been reviewed, discussed, and presented as a consensus report to the field by the NASEM, the value and importance of children's home languages have yet to be fully processed and integrated into definitions of high-quality ECE. Similarly, the information is omitted or minimized in many ECE degree programs offered by institutions of higher education.

Institutions of higher education offering AA or BA degrees in early childhood education must revise their coursework and degree programs to reflect the current and future demographics of the United States and take the research evidence on culture and home language into account. ECE programs must use this knowledge to be intentional about implementing culturally and linguistically responsive environments. Failure to do so may undermine any potential benefits of children's participation in early education.

DLLs and Latino children are the future American workforce. The educational achievement of the current generation of young DLLs is therefore a national interest, and ECE programs, schools, and teacher preparation programs have a special obligation to “get it right” (Espinosa 2010).





## ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO THE BA REQUIREMENT?

Most program administrators we interviewed talked in substantial detail about the challenges of managing and retaining their workforce, including supporting teachers to earn degrees. However, questions about alternative credentialing were most often met with silence or shrugs. This was also the case in every teacher focus group.

We asked teachers about alternative certification in two ways. First, we asked, “Are there any types of alternative certification that you would consider a good alternative to the requirement for a BA degree?” Second, we asked, “If it were possible for you to meet the BA requirement with a combination of an AA degree in early childhood education and some form of online class work, would this be of interest to you?”

When asked, teachers in our focus groups did not mention any existing alternative credentialing options in their state. Neither did they offer ideas or thoughts on what an alternative credential could include. Many participants had little interest in taking an online course (“e.g., “that’s not how I learn”), or expressed dissatisfaction with online courses they had already taken. Therefore, any alternatives based on online learning experiences would be challenged from the outset.

Teachers most often discussed the BA requirement as a necessary condition of their employment; often talking at length about both the challenges involved and the benefits they have received from furthering their education. Many participants expressed pride and satisfaction at having begun or completing an AA or BA degree. Participants discussed the learning experiences involved in taking college courses and described how they used the information to improve their teaching for the benefit of the children enrolled in their classrooms.

When UnidosUS asked about alternative certification options, some program administrators expressed the concern that ECE would become a field in which teachers with a BA are held in higher regard than experienced teachers who have earned the alternative credential. Administrators also expressed concerns about whether Latina staff would be motivated to earn a certificate that had limited transferability outside of the field.

## SUMMARY

Based on the comments we received during our interviews with program administrators and from ten teacher focus groups among UnidosUS Affiliates, we found some support for both possible outcomes (NASEM 2017) of the BA Challenge: in the face of increasing educational requirements, some Latina teachers did leave the field and/or accepted demotions. However, among the Affiliates we spoke with, Latina teachers were more likely to choose to stay in their positions and pursue a degree. These teachers have received divergent levels of support, financial and otherwise. Ultimately, UnidosUS found that the BA degree requirement has been widely accepted as a reality of the field by both program administrators and classroom teachers at a number of our Affiliates. This was the case despite the numerous and significant obstacles and challenges that teachers encountered as they pursued their degrees.

First and foremost, the BA requirement creates significant stress and hardships as well as opportunities for the Latina ECE workforce. There are multiple personal and financial impacts to the demands of working and attending school. Consequently, additional policies deserve consideration to support Latina teachers to successfully confront the BA Challenge.

Second, UnidosUS found little support for alternative teacher credentialing options among UnidosUS Affiliate program administrators or teachers outside of some Migrant/Seasonal Head Start programs.

Third, Latina teachers confront many strong challenges to maintain their employment and pursue college degrees. Additional policies and system changes are necessary to support an ECE workforce expected to produce measurable outcomes in the learning and development of diverse young children.

Finally, it is essential that the field develop and disseminate a definition of high-quality early childhood education among all program types that explicitly recognizes and actively promotes the adoption and implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive policies, standards, monitoring, and classroom practices.

The research evidence on the importance of culture and home language to early learning and development is extensive and has been reviewed and organized by the NASEM. Given the importance of the early childhood years and the growing diversity of America's children, it is incumbent upon federal and state policy makers to address barriers to children's full achievement by fully establishing cultural and linguistic responsiveness as first, an essential element of program quality; second, as a required aspect of program operations; and finally, as an important component of program monitoring.



In addition, policymakers can move teacher preparation programs to address these crucial content areas in substantive ways, as well as more fully support teachers through increased supports for degree completion and dramatically improved compensation considering the significant hardships that ECE teachers face when balancing full-time employment with continued education.

## CONCLUSION

Through examining the BA Challenge via program administrator interviews and teacher focus groups, UnidosUS discovered that the Latina ECE teachers we spoke with are largely willing to make an investment in their own education, often at great financial and personal cost.

Our research also unveiled what UnidosUS refers to as **“the Real BA Challenge,”** namely:

*Neither ECE teachers who enter the field with a degree nor teachers that go on to earn one as a condition of their employment are compensated at a level commensurate with their credentials or expertise.*

In 2018, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), ECE teachers earned a median pay of between \$23,240 and \$29,780 annually for full-time employment. Meanwhile, bus drivers, a career for which only a high school diploma or equivalent is required, earned a median pay of \$34,450 annually. In fact, ECE teachers are earning poverty-level wages, with the 2018 threshold set at \$25,100 for a family of four, according to U.S. Department of Health & Human Service’s Poverty Guidelines.

The Real BA Challenge poses significant challenges for:

- The morale and livelihood of educators who are invested in the care and education of some of the most vulnerable members of society
- Long-term retention in the ECE profession
- Equity in a female-dominated field with a large percentage of women of color, including Latinas

UnidosUS recommends that future investigations duplicate this report’s approach with a nationally representative sample and continue to gather teacher and administrator narratives that support pay parity for the field while identifying and calling out barriers to degree completion.





## PART 2: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the information gathered during our interviews with Affiliate program administrators and the information obtained from teacher focus groups, UnidosUS presents the following policy recommendations:

### RECOMMENDATION 1

#### **Increase ECE Teacher Compensation to be Commensurate with Job Responsibilities.**

Since early learning and development is valuable, powerful, and consequential, the value of the work performed by ECE teachers deserves to be compensated accordingly.

There is a long-term trend by federal and state policymakers toward improving ECE program quality by raising the educational requirements for teachers. The approach is well-intentioned and justified, given the strength of the research evidence.

Regrettably, another long-term trend in ECE is the succession of publications describing ECE teacher compensation as fundamentally inadequate (Whitebook et al. 2018). UnidosUS concurs. In our view, current compensation levels are counter-productive to high-quality programs for young children. Therefore, UnidosUS strongly recommends implementing an ECE minimum wage of \$20 per hour plus comprehensive benefits for all classroom teachers with a BA in ECE in all publicly funded programs.

In order to reasonably expect further increases in program and classroom quality from current levels, it is essential that ECE teacher compensation must be raised toward the levels of responsibility that teachers are expected to bring to their positions.

As the research so clearly demonstrates, children’s long-term development is profoundly shaped by their daily interactions and experiences with adults. The realistic policy pathway to improve program quality and to enhance child outcomes is to compensate ECE teachers so that they can reasonably be expected to:

- Implement research-based strategies necessary to promote children’s learning across all developmental domains: physical, social-emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and approaches to learning
- Assess children’s knowledge, skills, and abilities, and then plan and implement individualized daily learning experiences that advance their development of language, early literacy, mathematics, and science
- Respond to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families enrolled in the program
- Assess and respond to children’s psychological states, including multiple experiences and sources of trauma
- Foster children’s love of learning; self-confidence and well-being; and tolerance and willingness to engage with others
- Promote children’s health and support family well-being, while coping with the multiple sources of stress from their work with young children, their pursuit of a degree, and managing their own families
- Coach and mentor younger members of the profession as experienced teachers gain confidence and experience in their work.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

### **Increase Supports and System Alignment to Facilitate Teacher’s Degree Completion.**

At the national level, Hispanic workers are underrepresented in ECE lead teacher positions and overrepresented in aide/assistant teacher roles; however, stratification at the state and local levels is important, as this stratification may differ from national averages (Whitebook et al. 2018, 25). Therefore, it is urgent that federal and state policy makers assess and respond to the need for increased supports to facilitate teacher degree completion and to improve system alignment to support Latina ECE teachers to begin and successfully complete degree programs.

First, UnidosUS recommends the creation of a federally-funded scholarship program, drawing on lessons learned from individual states’ experience, that would be open to ECE teachers of all program types (federal, state, private). Creating this program would ensure that all adults working in ECE settings have access to funding for their degree

programs in all 50 states. Ideally, the scholarship would not only cover the costs of AA and BA degrees but also opportunities for continued learning once teachers completed their BA (e.g., additional coursework on dual language learners, children with disabilities, child assessment, or data analysis).

Second, in addition to tuition payments, scholarships should also cover teachers' release time—that is, paying for substitutes to enable teachers to leave work and arrive on time for classes. Scholarships should also be designed to cover transportation and child care costs.

Finally, UnidosUS recommends that all federal and state agencies funding ECE programs should evaluate current funding streams and increase supports to programs to directly fund teacher release time in order to attend degree-related classes.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

**Revise teacher preparation programs to meaningfully incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as substantive and fundamental to course syllabi and degree program requirements.**

The recent reports from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine on the importance of culture and dual language learners necessitate strong and swift action to address the disparity between the scientific evidence and the current content of many college courses and degree programs in ECE.

For UnidosUS, the lack of attention to cultural and linguistic responsiveness in many (if not most) ECE teacher preparation programs is unacceptable and must be addressed without delay. Extensive information on cultural responsiveness and dual language development must be included in teacher preparation courses and degree programs.

The disconnect between the tens of thousands of diverse children in ECE classrooms around the United States and the content of college courses used to prepare their teachers perpetuates inequitable access to high-quality early childhood education, thus contributing to the continuing and persistent achievement gap that too many Latino and other children experience.

### RECOMMENDATION 4

**Revise teacher preparation programs to mandate transparent and seamless articulation agreements that facilitate college credits for the CDA Credential as well as ensuring smooth transitions from AA degrees into BA programs without loss of credits.**

State policymakers should work with community colleges and universities to provide uniformity in the how college credits are awarded for earning the CDA, a substantial and time-consuming credential. The CDA is the most widely accepted credential in early childhood education, and a traditional stepping stone on the path of career advancement. It is based on a core set of six competency standards, which guide early care professionals as they work toward becoming qualified teachers of young children.

Furthermore, UnidosUS recommends that articulation agreements are put in place to provide teachers with standardized and viable pathways between the AA and BA degree, so that credits are not lost along the way. The frequent lack of alignment is discouraging both personally and financially. Currently, this lack of alignment is a significant challenge to Latina and other teachers in the ECE workforce seeking to begin and complete degree programs.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

**Revise teacher preparation programs to assess and develop the availability of hybrid (blended) and on-site course offerings to meet available demand.**

State policymakers should provide incentives to increase the availability of blended/hybrid courses when current demand for such courses exceeds availability.

Hybrid or blended courses constitute a format where a portion of instruction is delivered online, with the remainder delivered in the classroom. There is a seamless connection between online content and in-class discussions and group work. Hybrid formats provide learners with more control over the timing, pace, and place of their learning, while still allowing for the in-person connection between classmates and instructors that distance/online learning lacks.

ECE teachers are working professionals. Increasing the flexibility in the way they learn, reducing travel obligations, and encouraging collaboration online is a way to better serve them as they balance full-time jobs and higher education.

## RECOMMENDATION 6

**The early childhood education field should recognize and incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as essential elements of high-quality ECE programs.**

States operating pre-K programs should review existing rating and monitoring systems, standards, and indicators in order to ensure that these systems recognize and incorporate cultural and linguistic responsiveness as essential elements of high-quality ECE programs.

State policymakers should revise the definition of “quality” used by programs and systems to include dimensions of cultural and linguistic responsiveness. To that end, all ECE programs should adopt the Office of Head Start *Multicultural Principles (ACF 2010)* as the foundation from which to define quality and as the basis for capacity-building within systems.

Second, states should review, select, and use specific items from the Head Start Program Performance Standards to establish cultural and linguistic responsiveness as an essential priority and component of program quality and effectiveness, reflected in program operations and quality rating systems.



## AREAS FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATION

In addition to the policy recommendations above, UnidosUS identifies the following topic areas as important for future investigation:

**Create a commission to evaluate current policies, procedures, and practices that negatively impact Latina teachers' abilities to begin and complete a degree program (AA or BA) in ECE.**

Federal agencies that fund ECE programs should evaluate how to monetize the benefits and advantages that bilingual ECE teachers bring to the field and test and implement new funding mechanisms to promote a workforce that is degreed and multilingual.

States operating pre-K programs should evaluate current policies and practices related to barriers to degree completion, including conditions that impede degree completion.

In addition, state commissions should study:

- How colleges and universities grant credit for the CDA Credential toward degrees.
- How colleges and universities align course and credit requirements for AA and BA degree programs, with the goal to eliminate disruptions (i.e. “lost” credits) as teachers progress in their professional development and to ensure smooth transitions between and through degree levels.



States should fund collaborative efforts to:

- Understand how teacher preparation programs can incorporate teachers’ work experience and professional development experiences toward college credit.
- Provide incentives for universities and ECE programs to assess and connect ECE programs’ professional development experiences with college coursework.
- Provide incentives to develop Spanish-language college courses in traditional, hybrid/blended, and online/distance formats.

### **Alternative Credentialing for Migrant/Seasonal Head Start Programs**

The conditions of Migrant/Seasonal Head Start (M/SHS) programs present a special consideration for alternative teacher credentials.

M/SHS programs operate in conjunction with local agricultural seasons; some programs (particularly in northern states) open classrooms for a few months or even just a few weeks, as agricultural workers arrive and depart during a specific crop season.

Under these circumstances, it was interesting and encouraging to note that the four UnidosUS Affiliates operating M/SHS programs who participated in the focus groups have invested considerable time and energy in supporting their teachers in obtaining degrees. At the same time, it is highly unrealistic to expect M/SHS programs to be able to hire teachers with BA degrees for a program season that lasts three or four weeks. Therefore, further investigation of a viable alternative teacher credential for teachers in M/SHS program is necessary.



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